

play like men. They didn't have the strength, the attitude, or the resilience for certain kinds of pieces. Their lips were different. Their lungs were less powerful. Their hands were smaller. That did not seem like a prejudice. It seemed like a fact, because when conductors and music directors and maestros held auditions, the men always seemed to sound better than the women. No one paid much attention to how auditions were held, because it was an article of faith that one of the things that made a music expert a music expert was that he could listen to music played under any circumstances and gauge, instantly and objectively, the quality of the performance. Auditions for major orchestras were sometimes held in the conductor's dressing room, or in his hotel room if he was passing through town. Performers played for five minutes or two minutes or ten minutes. What did it matter? Music was music. Rainer Kuchl, the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic, once said he could instantly tell the difference with his eyes closed between, say, a male and female violinist. The trained ear, he believed, could pick up the softness and flexibility of the female style.

But over the past few decades, the classical music world has undergone a revolution. In the United States, orchestra musicians began to organize themselves politically. They formed a union and fought for proper contracts, health benefits, and protections against arbitrary firing, and along with that came a push for fairness in hiring. Many musicians thought that conductors were abusing their power and playing favorites. They wanted the audition process to be formalized. That meant an official audition committee was

established instead of a conductor making the decision all by himself. In some places, rules were put in place forbidding the judges from speaking among themselves during auditions, so that one person's opinion would not cloud the view of another. Musicians were identified not by name but by number. Screens were erected between the committee and the auditioner, and if the person auditioning cleared his or her throat or made any kind of identifiable sound—if they were wearing heels, for example, and stepped on a part of the floor that wasn't carpeted—they were ushered out and given a new number. And as these new rules were put in place around the country, an extraordinary thing happened: orchestras began to hire women.

In the past thirty years, since screens became commonplace, the number of women in the top U.S. orchestras has increased fivefold. "The very first time the new rules for auditions were used, we were looking for four new violinists," remembers Herb Weksblatt, a tuba player for the Metropolitan Opera in New York, who led the fight for blind auditions at the Met in the mid-1960s. "And all of the winners were women. That would simply never have happened before. Up until that point, we had maybe three women in the whole orchestra. I remember that after it was announced that the four women had won, one guy was absolutely furious at me. He said, 'You're going to be remembered as the SOB who brought women into this orchestra.'"

What the classical music world realized was that what they had thought was a pure and powerful first impression—listening to someone play—was in fact hopelessly corrupted. "Some people look like they sound

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better than they actually sound, because they look confident and have good posture," one musician, a veteran of many auditions, says. "Other people look awful when they play but sound great. Other people have that bored look when they play, but you can't hear it in the sound. There is always this dissonance between what you see and hear. The audition begins the first second the person is in view. You think, Who is this nerd? Or, Who does this guy think he is?—just by the way they walk out with their instrument."

Julie Landsman, who plays principal French horn for the Metropolitan Opera in New York, says that she's found herself distracted by the position of someone's mouth. "If they put their mouthpiece in an unusual position, you might immediately think, Oh my God, it can't possibly work. There are so many possibilities. Some horn players use a brass instrument, and some use nickel-silver, and the kind of horn the person is playing tells you something about what city they come from, their teacher, and their school, and that pedigree is something that influences your opinion. I've been in auditions without screens, and I can assure you that I was prejudiced. I began to listen with my eyes, and there is no way that your eyes don't affect your judgment. The only true way to listen is with your ears and your heart."

In Washington, D.C., the National Symphony Orchestra hired Sylvia Alimena to play the French horn. Would she have been hired before the advent of screens? Of course not. The French horn—like the trombone—is a "male" instrument. More to the point, Alimena is tiny. She's five feet tall. In truth, that's an irrelevant fact. As

another prominent horn player says, "Sylvia can blow a house down." But if you were to look at her before you really listened to her, you would not be able to hear that power, because what you saw would so contradict what you heard. There is only one way to make a proper snap judgment of Sylvia Alimena, and that's from behind a screen.

2. *A Small Miracle*

There is a powerful lesson in classical music's revolution. Why, for so many years, were conductors so oblivious to the corruption of their snap judgments? Because we are often careless with our powers of rapid cognition. We don't know where our first impressions come from or precisely what they mean, so we don't always appreciate their fragility. Taking our powers of rapid cognition seriously means we have to acknowledge the subtle influences that can alter or undermine or bias the products of our unconscious. Judging music sounds like the simplest of tasks. It is not, any more than sipping cola or rating chairs or tasting jam is easy. Without a screen, Abbie Conant would have been dismissed before she played a note. With a screen, she was suddenly good enough for the Munich Philharmonic.

And what did orchestras do when confronted with their prejudice? They solved the problem, and that's the second lesson of *Blink*. Too often we are resigned to what happens in the blink of an eye. It doesn't seem like we have much control over whatever bubbles to the surface from our unconscious. But we do, and if we can control